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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 KABUL 003667

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (ADDED ADDRESSEES AND PASS LINES)

MONTREAL PASS TO USMISSION ICAO
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E.O. 12958 N/A
TAGS: [EAIR](#) [PGOV](#) [AF](#)
SUBJECT: LACK OF AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL OVERSIGHT RAISES SAFETY
CONCERNS: A PROPOSAL FOR A UNIFIED AIRSPACE AUTHORITY

REF: (A) 09 Kabul 2694
(B) 09 Kabul 2667

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11. (SBU) Summary: Afghanistan's air traffic has grown by 67 percent over the past year, outstripping its antiquated, procedural-based air traffic control system and a surveillance system that covers only a small fraction of its airspace. Joint airspace use by commercial and combat flights without up-to-date technology and active coordination between separate controlling entities has led to immediate safety and efficiency concerns for combat forces and commercial passengers alike. A new USAID-funded radar at Kabul International Airport (KIA) will enhance safety, and a German-funded surveillance system coming on line in 2010 will improve airspace control.

12. (SBU) However, the current system of air traffic flow management does not address the need for an organized assignment of takeoff and landing slots at KIA and raises serious concerns about air traffic safety. We encourage the U.S. Combined Forces Air Component Commander (CFACC), as the designated Airspace Control Authority for Afghanistan, in coordination with Ministry of Transportation and Civil Aviation (MOTCA), to establish a dedicated airspace and air traffic authority. In addition to enhancing safety, a unified system will promote increased efficiency and expand economic growth in Afghanistan. End summary.

Afghanistan's Airspace: Many Uses, Many Restrictions

13. (SBU) CFACC has delegated to multiple agencies and nations the authority to manage different portions of Afghan airspace, creating potential for gaps between responsible authorities. Few Afghan nationals are involved in managing the country's valuable and busy airspace. AFCENT manages (through a contractor) approach control at

Bagram, Kabul, and Kandahar air fields, as well as control of all flights above 2,500 feet. At KIA, the country's main commercial airport, air traffic tower controllers from ISAF member states rotate through in six-month tours. Additionally, MOTCA contracts the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) to train Afghan tower air traffic controllers at KIA tower, where they currently perform their job in a supervised environment.

14. (SBU) While procedural air traffic control is within ICAO standards, it creates efficiency and economic challenges for airlines. No air traffic controller has radar views of airspace above 16,500 feet, meaning they must rely on radio communication with aircraft, including the thousands of flights that transit Afghan airspace on international routes. These flights stay above 29,000 feet, while flights that originate or terminate in Afghanistan must stay below this altitude. Modern jets are engineered to perform best at altitudes above 30,000 feet, meaning they are less fuel efficient, and thus more expensive to operate, at the lower altitude to which they are restricted. Improvements are being made. The German government is funding an 11.6 million Euro Multilateral system radar (MLAT) that will be operational in December 2010. COMUSAFCENT is integrating existing radar and future MLAT data into a new Kabul Air Center Control (KACC) facility that will provide control over higher levels of airspace.

Traffic Collision Avoidance Alarms Are a Growing Concern

15. (SBU) Joint usage of Afghanistan's airspace by combat flights controlled by air battle managers (not air traffic controllers) remains a challenge for commercial carriers. Controllers for military and civilian aircraft coordinate to transition aircraft through each other's designated airspace. Unless carefully coordinated, or in the absence of appropriate procedural controls, this practice would be inherently dangerous. COMAFCENT has identified this area of concern, and directed the control authorities to improve tactics, techniques, and procedures and upgrade inter-agency communication. However, further improvements are needed in order to reduce risk and improve efficiencies.

16. (SBU) Many military aircraft operate in Afghanistan airspace

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without reliable coordination with civilian air traffic control and often cross or approach civilian air routes. Commercial aircraft are equipped with Traffic Collision Avoidance System (TCAS) devices that warn of potential collisions. In the first ten months of 2009, pilots reported 93 incidents to KACC in which their TCAS warning sounded in the cockpit, requiring them to take action. Of those 93 incidents, 53 involved both civilian and military aircraft, and in eight, aircraft appear to have been operating outside of Afghanistan's regulatory procedures.

Air Traffic Control: First-Come, Best Served

17. (SBU) Unlike most countries, Afghanistan does not have an air traffic control flow management authority for its overall airspace or at KIA. CFACC is the Airspace Control Authority, but air traffic controllers have different chains of command, as well as safety and oversight standards, depending on the NATO nation providing the service. There is also a lack of coordinated communication and common automation system between air traffic control facilities. For example, a commercial plane departing from KIA, bound for Dubai, receives clearance to take off and ascend above 2,500 feet from KIA air traffic controllers. The controllers, however, are not aware of air space congestion en route (for example, near Kandahar, Central Asia's busiest airport) or weather conditions at other airports. Bad weather often slows takeoffs and landings at KIA, but KIA controllers have no mechanism to notify aircraft until they are nearby. The planes must then circle overhead (sometimes for hours). In order to improve service, efficiency, and safety, AFCENT is working with NATO nations to develop a standardization agreement that will create common processes, procedures, terms, and conditions for all nations that provide air traffic control to be completed in

the next year.

Air Traffic Management at Kabul International Airport

18. (SBU) Air traffic management at KIA is an additional problem. Most commercial flights depart between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m., along with dozens of flights operated by military contractors, the United Nations and U.S. Government agencies. All flights departing from KIA must transit Bagram airspace, meaning they often cannot take off if military flights are nearby. Flight plans are poorly coordinated -- controllers at KIA do not know the next day's flight schedule in advance and often are not aware of a flight until the pilot requests engine start clearance.

19. (SBU) This lack of central coordination and flow management has also resulted in constant, lengthy delays of up to two hours on the taxiway at KIA. In one incident, passengers on a Pamir Air flight threatened the flight crew, who called in customs and ISAF police for assistance. Police ultimately removed all passengers from the plane and cancelled the flight. Executives at other airlines acknowledge most morning flights are delayed due to air traffic congestion.

Comment

110. (SBU) CFACC has supported numerous actions to improve air traffic services within Afghanistan, including the installation and operation of the new Kabul radar and approach control facility, and has partnered with the Federal Aviation Administration to train Afghan controllers at KIA and KACC. AFCENT has also assessed KIA and launched efforts to improve airport flight planning and scheduling, regional airspace design, and standardization of airport and air traffic control. Currently slated for completion in the next few years, AFCENT's construction of a new, semi-permanent facility for Kabul Area Control Center will integrate existing radars at Bagram, Kabul, Ghazni and Kandahar, thereby leading the way to the creation of an MLAT system that presents a true, robust picture of Afghanistan's airspace.

111. (SBU) But while we recognize AFCENT's efforts and the need for partnership to develop Afghanistan's air traffic system, we believe more needs to be done. We encourage CFACC, in coordination with

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MOTCA, to establish a dedicated airspace and air traffic authority as soon as possible. This organization would consolidate responsibility for doctrine, policy, standardization, oversight and integration of all aspects of Afghan air traffic management to support combat and civil aircraft operations. It will also help us develop a long-term plan to hand over airspace control to Afghan authorities and accelerate efforts to upgrade Afghanistan's air traffic system under post's requested \$140 million assistance package.

EIKENBERRY